

# Strategies for Picking the Right Adviser

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## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly tight job market, the selection of an adviser has never been more important to help guide young scholars in their career development. Advisers play a critical role in students' careers and beyond, from providing substantive help with the dissertation to sharing the norms of the discipline, helping them navigate the job market, and introducing them to potential collaborators. Yet, many graduate students do not know how to go about identifying the best adviser for them. Here, we provide some suggestions to graduate students for how best to pick a dissertation adviser and other mentors, noting some of the most important aspects of the relationship and highlighting some of the most critical elements to look for in finding an appropriate and helpful adviser.


Perhaps there has been no time in the academy when choosing the right dissertation adviser has been more important. The number of full-time academic jobs is declining, while the number of applicants and PhD students continues to rise (Woolston 2019). The 2020–2021 *APSA eJobs Report: The Political Science Job Market* and the *APSA Graduate Placement Report: Analysis of Political Science Placements for 2018–2020* (McGrath and Diaz 2021a, 2021b) present bleak prospects for the immediate future and signal difficult longer-term trends. Graduate students today need every mechanism of support to produce their highest-quality work and succeed in the profession. Yet, everyone in the academy has either heard horror stories about or experienced the horror of a bad adviser. These range from exploitive advisers<sup>1</sup> who had students wash cars, mow lawns, babysit for them, or even stolen their work, to those who never responded to requests for help or even forgot their student's name when a potential employer called. There are just as many cases of people who were fortunate enough to have an adviser who was a total mensch: one who takes the time to help the student not only be a better scholar but also a better person; who takes on a student when no one else will; who helps finance a study the student cannot afford on their own; drives cross-country to get their student out of a jam; officiates at their wedding; and truly gives support over a lifetime. And although these are the extremes, it is the more mundane, day-to-day activities of the adviser that matter for most. All else equal, having the right adviser gives


students the best chance to be successful (Benesh 2001; Bennion 2004; Hesli and Lee 2011; Hesli, Lee, and Mitchell 2012; Monroe 2003; Yanow 2020).

How to choose an adviser might seem terrifically obvious to those already in the field, but to the graduate student just beginning their journey, such information is almost never known until well after the fact. Given the importance of one's dissertation adviser, and the dissertation committee as well, it is surprising how little published guidance exists on how to choose them (Dericks et al. 2019). What does exist is more often found in the hard sciences and is focused on funding and the lab model (Jabre et al. 2021) or is part of much larger and more general discussions of graduate school (Carsey 2020).

Here, we seek to provide a starting point for that guidance and build on the growing recognition of the need for professional preparation of our graduate students (Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012; McCabe and McCabe 2010). This article is primarily geared toward helping graduate students succeed by communicating the most critical factors involved in finding the right dissertation adviser. We appreciate and recognize the difference between an adviser, mentor, and the committee. All advisers should be mentors, but not all mentors are advisers. Although our focus is on the dissertation adviser, the guidance offered here also applies broadly to finding good mentorship and choosing committee members and should also be suitable to assist junior faculty and undergraduates in finding mentors.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the definition of success encompasses a certain amount of subjectivity. We define success as the student completing a dissertation, getting a tenure-track job (for those who want one), and earning tenure, as well as publishing in selective journals and presses and achieving a respectable citation count. Success also includes attaining rewarding long-term positions

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outside academia for students who prefer them. Indeed, the days of academic careers as the only option for employment are long gone. However, the considerations of those who want nonacademic jobs vary widely, and the metrics of success for them are not as easy to quantify. Thus, some of the following guidance may not be as important, whereas other factors, such as connections to the industry of interest, may play a more prominent role for them. If students know they are not interested in an academic career, they need to make sure that they find an adviser who is open to and accepting of employment options in government, industry, and the nonprofit sector and who has the experience, professional networks, and motivation to help them get such positions. A word of caution here: the ability to do this without negative consequences varies across departments. It is important that a student knows that they have the support of the department to pursue a nonacademic career path before making such goals known.

Over the years, and through our respective roles running postdoc programs, developing professional development seminars, working with graduate students, and serving in various roles within our field's institutions—as well as being students and advisers ourselves, we began to see some common themes and questions coming from students who were wondering how to find the right adviser. We then set out to engage the profession, our colleagues, and former students on this topic and found that many students struggled with finding a good adviser, or at least the right adviser for them. Many students got their dissertation adviser by happenstance, without sufficient thought or attention to the qualities of the person who might be most beneficial for them; others failed to recognize how their own behavior might interact

literally took scholars off the street and funded everyone and anyone who simply cared about science. Many of us lived in his home and then followed in his footsteps and did the same for others. These advisers and thousands of others changed our lives and those of our colleagues, academically, professionally, and personally. But this does not mean that such relationships are automatic; rather, the closest and most productive relationships are chosen as well as cultivated. With these thoughts in mind, and with humility, we offer the following suggestions to young scholars seeking the most effective mentorship experience and hope this guide is equally useful for professional development instructors, graduate directors, and potential advisers as well.

**1. Choose your own adviser and do your homework.** Choosing your adviser is one of the most important decisions of your academic career: it is critically important not to let anyone else pick your adviser for you. Some students enter graduate school knowing who they want to work with, but too often, students who are unsure of their interests simply accept an assigned adviser and do not seek out someone who might be a better fit for their interests and work style. This may be fine to get one started, but after that, students should take an active role seeking out the best adviser for them. Even if students return to the person originally assigned to them, the choice must be theirs. This is not to discount that adviser choices vary by department. Some departments have bylaws or policies that provide strict rules for the program, including the formal requirements of “personal” advisers versus program directors, and so forth. It is important to know and recognize such requirements so that students can properly place their “adviser decision” into the broader context of their graduate program.

### *Choosing your adviser is one of the most important decisions of your academic career.*

with that person in ways that would be either constructive or problematic. We base the suggestions in this article not only on our own experience as students but also on the collective thoughts and experiences of many current and former directors of graduate studies, advisers, and advisees.

Certainly, no set of suggestions is perfectly applicable to every student—but for those who do not know where to start in finding the right adviser, these criteria should provide a firm foundation. But a good advisee–adviser relationship is not built solely on these criteria. Lifelong relationships and friendships of both a personal and intellectual nature between student and adviser remain widespread and should be encouraged. The esteemed Fred Greenstein used to say that his degrees came with a lifetime guarantee. He honored that commitment and went out of his way to provide advice and comfort, as well as letters of recommendation, for former students, often decades after they graduated. Bob Jervis did not even like the term “adviser” because he saw these relationships as mutual and interactive; he eschewed the power imbalance typically associated with the term. Lindon Eaves, Anglican priest and geneticist, had a calling to serve God, science, and humanity; his commitment to his advisees went far beyond science, encompassing the health of each advisee to their very soul. He remained a close friend and guide to many of his students. Nick Martin

An adviser's main job is to help make you a better scholar and teacher. In a career of research, one of the early tasks requires researching various schools, programs, advisers, and dissertation topics. However, it is essential that you do your research on yourself first. Know yourself and your goals. Only then can you find the right people to help you achieve them. In all things, remember that it is your career and no one else's. The responsibility of setting up a good mentoring relationship remains with you.

When selecting an adviser, the following actions can be helpful: talking to other students, both those currently in the program and those who have already graduated or otherwise moved on; looking up potential advisers' publications to see who are listed as coauthors and in the acknowledgments section; looking up the placement records of former advisees; seeing what topics former advisees have pursued in their dissertations; scheduling (multiple) meetings with potential advisers to get to know them better; and volunteering to do some research for them early on to see their work style. At the same time, an adviser who has few advisees does not necessarily raise a red flag. Some scholars focus on research that is not in the mainstream and therefore may attract fewer students. Some programs do not admit students studying a certain topic as well.

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It is also important to be aware of faculty with a reputation of engaging in exploitive behaviors. Advisers with a history of not championing students' work or, in the worst case, claiming it as their own should be avoided. Generally, someone who has a negative track record should be considered with extra caution. Students should choose their adviser carefully because this relationship, or at least its effects, like it or not, will last a lifetime. Indeed, the dissertation will exist in print indefinitely.

**2. Pick advisers with whom you can communicate and who are responsive.** Different people have different styles of communication and different interests. Some prefer to communicate in writing and are best at that, whereas others are much better at communicating in conversation. Know what style works best for you, learn the same about potential advisers, and then find someone who aligns with your preferred mode of communication. No matter the mode, any potential adviser should be open to communication around the topics that matter to you. Search for advisers who promptly respond to emails, dissertation drafts, and other materials. Responsive advisers will process letters of recommendation and other necessary materials promptly. However, it is critical that the student accept responsibility as well by always giving advisers reasonable notice and time to accomplish these tasks and by sending reminders to them of upcoming deadlines.

**3. Pick advisers who treat graduate students as future colleagues in training and who give constructive criticism.** A good adviser must be able to tell you the truth about yourself and your work. Advisers who cannot appropriately critique the academic work and professional conduct of their students do them a disservice. Giving reviews in the gentlest manner, or attempting to soften the critique of subpar work, does not properly prepare students for a life in the academy. Advisers who deliver feedback directly, honestly, and professionally characterize the standards of what scholars should offer and receive in the field. To be clear, we do not advocate being harsh or mean. Just as advisers deserve respect, you deserve respect as well.

help prepare you for the reality of the academic profession. The job of an adviser is to serve as a guide for students to learn how to direct themselves to grow intellectually and professionally. They are there to help you navigate the discipline and be honest guides on the way to your future—not to tell you what to do. They are not personal therapists and should never be treated as such. Nevertheless, good advisers will consider advisees' mental health and be able to offer advice or suggestions for managing the challenges that come with graduate school. Preparing advisees for how to deal with criticism requires both understanding them and teaching them what to do.

**4. Pick advisers who are experienced with publishing, know the mechanics of research, and who are good at evaluating and developing high-quality research; it helps if they are well informed in your area of interest so they can give more substantive feedback.** The adviser's primary job is being a role model of good behavior in research, teaching, mentoring, and publication. They do not need to be masters of your very specific topic: that is your responsibility. However, it is important that your adviser knows enough about your topic and field to properly direct you and put you in contact with people who are experts. Read their published work: Do you see yourself conducting similar research? At the same time, pick an adviser who encourages you to do your own work and not simply pursue an extension of theirs. The best advisers teach you how to be your best self, not how to be a mirror image of them.

A well-suited adviser will understand the general state of the field and help you integrate your work into it in a coherent, persuasive, and impactful manner. If you want an academic career, you may not want to choose an adviser who has not published a paper in years. Depending on what you want to do, that may not be a deal breaker; yet, do you want a surgeon to operate on you who has not practiced medicine in a while? However, never assume that because someone publishes a lot, they will be willing to coauthor with you.

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Advisers should teach you how to conduct research, teach, and operate within an academic environment without demeaning your value or self-worth. But if you are looking for a cheerleader who only tells you how wonderful you are, that person is not a good adviser. An adviser is not a parent or a mate; nor do they owe you unconditional positive feedback. A good adviser will tell you the truth about your work. This not only makes your work better but if they are willing to tell you when your work is wanting, it also means you can trust them when they tell you it is good.

Good advisers will also be candid about the unwritten rules and standards of your field, both good and bad. Having an adviser who will say "no" at times and set boundaries on your relationship is necessary, because it teaches you about professional limits. Their job is not to hold your hand, coddle you, or help you manage your emotions: you must learn to manage yourself and your own emotions. You should always treat advisers with the professional respect they deserve: practicing this kind of professionalism will

**5. Pick advisers whom you can work with.** This is critical. Everyone works differently, and there is no one style that works best for everyone. Some advisers will hunt you down if they have not heard from you within a certain time and exhort you to get your work done; others will never reach out but remain responsive if you do so. To complete your dissertation in a timely manner, you must know what style works for you and find an adviser who can provide what you need: it is vital to align your expectations. Be honest with yourself. Think about what works for you and observe how your potential adviser works. Do you need structure and weekly meetings, or do you operate best with maximum independence? Engage in in-depth conversations with your potential adviser not only on your topic of interest but also about expectations, both yours and theirs. Get to know your adviser: it is more important that you can work together than that you like them as a person. Ideally, an adviser will have a similar workflow. It is also helpful when they use similar tools (methods, software,

organizational, etc.) and have a writing style that is not antithetical to yours. These factors not only make it easier for you to complete your dissertation but also help you produce the highest-quality work.

It is critical however, to keep your expectations realistic. Like much else in life, you must do the work yourself and assume responsibility for your own professional growth and career. An adviser's job is not to do any work for you but to facilitate your development and your ability to learn how to do your work on your own.

**6. Pick advisers who have time for you, who are interested in working with you, and who will invest in you.** Be thoughtful about picking an adviser who is already overloaded with students, has a heavy administrative load, runs a large lab, or has other leadership obligations. It is not that they may not want to help you, but they only have so many hours in the day. Do not assume that just because you worked as a teaching or research assistant for a particular person that they will automatically agree to supervise your dissertation.

Investment in your development means more than providing guidance on your dissertation topic or writing a letter of recommendation when asked. A good adviser will spend the time talking about professional norms like promptness, attention to detail, and work-life balance—and the thousands of intangibles that help you succeed. A good adviser looks for opportunities for their students and promotes their interests for the student's sake. They are advocates. To attain this level of investment requires that you must be willing to invest in them too. Academia is a business, whether some want to admit it or not. Respect your adviser's time and effort, and they should respect yours. It is critical to understand that you should expect guidance and support, but not someone to solve your problems. Always meet advisers prepared and organized about what you want to talk about. Take notes. Remind them where your previous discussions left off. You do not always have to take their advice, but being a good advisee means being willing to listen carefully and to consider their comments thoughtfully. Many advisers have decades more of knowledge and experience than you do, which allows them to see things you cannot.

It is also important to respect when people do not want to engage with you for whatever reason. Our colleagues report, with increasing frequency, that students became angry, defensive, or accusatory when a potential adviser did not respond positively to their solicitations or said no to an advising request. Intellectual and emotional maturity demand respect for others' decisions. Just because someone does not engage with you the way you want them to is not a reason to think or speak badly of them. Everyone is entitled to make decisions about the best use of their own time—but no one is entitled to someone else's time, energy, or attention.

*The days of simply having a good idea and working hard at it as the sufficient condition for career success are long over.*

When someone does not respond positively to your requests, most likely it has nothing to do with you: everyone has limits and must manage the demands of their own lives. For example, many faculty members have more than one career and do not take academic advisees as a matter of necessity. In fact, many prominent scholars

advise infrequently or not at all. One such example is the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman. He rarely supervises dissertations (as far as we could see). In other cases, the person may recognize that they are not a good fit with you, even if you do not agree. Respect is the foundation of a good relationship, and sometimes that means no relationship at all.

**7. Do not judge a book by its cover or pick an adviser simply because you like their personality.** Do not pick an adviser just because they are a big name in the field, although it is fine if they do happen to be a prominent figure. Indeed, it can be risky to pick an adviser primarily based on their reputation in the field: there will not be an automatic transfer of their reputation onto you. There is a perception that having a "big name" person as your dissertation chair will potentially sway/influence departments to interview or hire you. We could not find published evidence to support this perception in the modern era, when controlling for other factors. However, the ranking and status of the university and department from which you obtain your degree do matter, or at least did matter in the recent past (Oprisko 2012).

Conversely, do not dismiss someone who may simply lack the status, polish, or social skills you might prefer. For example, junior faculty tend to be more methodologically sophisticated and often know the state-of-the-art tools and literature better. They can be great mentors, tend to have fewer students, and are more in touch with graduate student demands and pressures. Yet, there are potential drawbacks to choosing a junior faculty member. They have more constraints and must focus on their own responsibilities so they can earn tenure and advance in their career. Keep in mind some programs do not allow junior faculty to be advisers; in such cases, they can make excellent committee members. Indeed, many students actually spend more of their time working with a junior member on their committee than with their adviser. In a fair world, this junior person would be the dissertation adviser because of all the work they put in, but institutional rules often prevent this and reputational concerns often preclude it.

In addition, do not pick an adviser simply because you find them a captivating lecturer or a fun person to listen to. Rather, pick an adviser you will listen to because you respect what they know, what they can teach you, and how they behave toward you. If a potential adviser's personality is strongly at odds with yours or their values are antagonistic to your own, we advise choosing someone else.

**8. Pick advisers who know the profession.** The days of simply having a good idea and working hard at it as the sufficient condition for career success are long over. Good advisers serve as guides not only on how to conduct research but also on how to build courses, write grants, interview, present, handle Q&A, and so on. They are also immersed in the profession—serving as editors,

participating in leadership positions within institutions, and running workshops, conferences, labs, institutes, and so forth: they are well networked. Advancement in one's career is only, in part, based on merit: it is also based on one's ability to navigate the professional expectations that go beyond teaching and research.

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**9. Listen to the potential adviser.** All too often people hear only what they want to hear. If you stop listening, many advisers will stop talking. Accept and be willing to be wrong, to follow guidance, to be open-minded, and to be responsive to constructive criticism. Listen to their views, thoughts, values, expectations, and perception of you and your work. Observe and accommodate to their communication style. Learn to be comfortable with discomfort.

It is essential to listen to potential advisers before you choose one. Advisers and potential advisers will often tell you what you need to know to make the right decision. The most important information on how and whom to choose as an adviser will come from the potential adviser. Sometimes that information is contained in what they do not say; the absence of information is also important information.

**10. Change advisers if the relationship is not working.** Many people stay with an adviser even after it becomes clear the relationship is not productive or functional. The adviser relationship is career long, whether it is positive or negative. It is better to pay some costs up front and secure the right adviser than to spend a lifetime suffering the consequences that can result from lacking appropriate mentorship. There are some critical caveats here, however. First, changes should occur early in the program. Changing advisers after the prospectus defense is ill advised and should only be done when there are no other good options; for instance, when an adviser leaves the field, or is too ill to continue working, or passes away. Generally, the plan for the dissertation is built with the adviser, and it can be challenging to ask a new adviser to agree to a plan they had no role in shaping. Second, make sure you know who the replacement adviser will be before you begin this process. Otherwise, you may be left in a very precarious position and be in an uncomfortable limbo within your department; this will seriously compromise your ability to finish. If you find a better adviser for you, tell that person and explain why you would like to switch. An individual who is willing to advise you will likely have advice regarding how to inform your prior adviser in a way that maintains that relationship, particularly if you would like them to remain on your committee. Third, approach the situation with tact, professionalism, and respect. The change should be about fit, not personal animosity, and it is important to make that clear and maintain a positive relationship with the former adviser.

In a perfect world, changing advisers should not be difficult, but in a world of humans, ego, and emotional reactions, it often hard and costly. Respect, maturity, planning, and considerable support from other faculty can help facilitate a successful change.

#### WHAT CRITERIA ARE MOST IMPORTANT?

A natural question is how students should adjudicate among these criteria when they come into conflict with one another. What if the student gets along with someone who is not particularly well versed in their field but does not get along with the person who is the expert? Which adviser should the student pick? Or what if a student wants two people on the committee who refuse to sit on the same committee together? How does a student decide what to do and how to proceed? These are just two examples of many possible circumstances. Of course, the reality is that the most important criteria can differ from person to person; what one individual values in an adviser may be completely irrelevant to another. As a result, the most important thing is that students

should clarify their own values and figure out what is most important to them so that they can choose the adviser who meets their most important criteria.

All departments have a limited number of faculty from which a student can choose. Often students are choosing between one to two potential advisers and, in the best of circumstances, three to four, each of whom will vary in how well they meet each criterion. We therefore asked many people about which is the most important criterion in the selection process. Overwhelmingly, they answered that students should choose the person they work with best. Skills and the other factors mentioned earlier are important, but if you cannot work with someone, no amount of ability will bring out the best in you.

With all this said, a good dissertation adviser is only one part of a larger constellation of people that students must put in place. No one person can help you achieve all your goals. This is where the committee and other mentors come into play. Some members will be great on translating ideas into impactful research and strong on substantive knowledge but weaker on new methods; others will be immersed in the discipline's institutions and willing to extend their networks; others can really push you on methods. Some will help you be a better teacher; others are better at helping you navigate the profession. You will need someone who is encouraging to balance out the curmudgeon who is critical but correct. Students need to build a team of experts and a community of peers. It may start with your dissertation adviser but does not end there. Your committee might also benefit from diversity in terms of expertise and methods. In some circumstances, if a student's home institution does not have the needed expertise, the student may be able to obtain such guidance from a scholar outside the university, although some schools have rules precluding this and adding such a person can pose logistical complications.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

We hope this brief guide will aid you in your pursuit and selection of a good adviser. In the best of circumstances, students who have the same adviser can bond like family. They may have dinner together every year, coauthor or work together in other ways, may spend personal time together, celebrate each other's success, support each other in failure and, when necessary, console each other when tragedy strikes. It is our hope that everyone can find these types of peers and advisers who build not only the science but also the scientist and the scientific community. Such a person may not be your dissertation adviser, but for every committed scholar there is a good mentor out there. Finding that person may happen quickly or by happenstance; for others, it may take longer. In every case, however, it takes meaningful effort to cultivate such a relationship and a commitment to be a good advisee—to give as much to your adviser as they give to you. A good advisee should recognize their obligation to pay it forward and commit to helping their peers and future students as they were helped. For many, the mentorship role never ends and continues through tenure, promotion, and career changes; in some cases, like some rare marriages, this relationship may end only in death. When a student and an adviser are a good match, each makes the other a stronger scholar and a better person. Under the best of circumstances, the relationship can develop into one that is mutually enriching across both their lives.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

## NOTES

1. The presence of exploitive senior faculty is an open secret that needs its own reckoning, and we look forward to someone else taking that on.
2. Some of the following guidance may also be helpful on how to be a good adviser, but that is not the intent of this article, and a number of works are dedicated to the topic (Abiddin, Hassan, and Ahmad 2009; Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry 1998; King 2003; Monroe 2003).

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